6: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936)1938
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

but not enough to drown it altogether. The ideal arrangement, which I have often observed among the Western Nuer, is to build on the edge of a whale-backed ridge with the huts and byres facing the broad back of the ridge. This ensures that the cattle will have dry kraals and also permits them to graze on the short grasses of the ridge. At the back of the huts and byres on slightly lower ground are the gardens. These must be on lower ground because the ridge itself is usually sandy and, where occupied, has a hard trodden floor of ashes and debris and is therefore unsuitable for cultivation of millet. They must also be at the back of the huts and byres so that the cattle can move freely to and from their kraals without invading the standing millet. To prevent this happening people erect a thornwood fence between the kraals and the gardens and extend it along both sides of the kraal, so that only the side opening on to the ridge is left unfenced. In Western Nuerland I have seen low mud dykes erected between the flooded plain and the approach to the ridge. These are to prevent the water encroaching too far in years of high flood.

I have sometimes wondered why Nuer so often build their villages on shadeless ridges in the middle of a treeless plain when it would be possible to build in some of the stretches of thornwood or palm forest that one finds here and there in their country. I have often noticed villages built in the open when shady spots are to be found a few hundred yards away. But Nuer can give good reasons for keeping to their dreary sites exposed to the fierce tropical sun and the bitter north wind. In the open their animals are safer from wild beasts; they are less worried by insect pests, and their kraals soon dry after rain. It would appear also that thornwood forest is less suitable for cultivation of millet than more open country. Nevertheless Nuer sometimes build in open forest. I have seen forest villages in parts of Lou and Eastern Gaajok country. The Eastern Gaajok villages, which I have not visited, are mainly in forest country.

Most of these ridges and knolls have probably been occupied for a very long period of time, perhaps long before the Nuer lived in their present home. In digging graves Nuer have found pots and cooking

6: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936)1938
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

stones and remains of fires. They have been occupied by many generations of Nuer. Families are not, however, bound to any particular piece of ground, and move freely when the ground is exhausted and no longer yields a good harvest of millet or rich pasturage for the cattle. A whole village may then move and live elsewhere for some years but sooner or later they will settle there again for it is their birth place. Families and groups of kinsmen will leave a village if there are many deaths, if the cattle are poorly (*be ran gien kä kwi tieth, kä kwi ghok*), or if fights have taken place in the village. Byres and huts generally last about five years and have then to be rebuilt. Gardens are cultivated for as long as ten successive years before they are finally exhausted. When cattle and sheep and goats have grazed on village pastures (*dor*) for about the same length of time the grasses show evident signs of exhaustion. Thus in 1936 the people of Nyueny pointed out to me that after about nine years of occupation their village pastures had been overgrazed and were poor in consequence.

Village sites are owned by certain clans and sections of clans. However, ownership is mainly a matter of sentiment, based on long association between a ridge and a lineage, and since the country is not over-populated and the Nuer do not make very extensive cultivations it never becomes a legal issue. Anyone may settle in a village and the villagers will show him where he may build his huts and byre and cultivate his millet. This practically means that he may build and cultivate anywhere not already in occupation or under cultivation. Nuer are very generous in such matters. In fact, however, a man is unlikely to settle in a village unless he can claim kinship with some of the villagers, *i.e.*, is genealogically attached to the dominant lineage there. *Mar*, kinship, can generally be discovered somewhere and consequently it is usually possible to place all the occupants of a village on a single genealogical chart. There are no real problems of ownership of land among the Nuer.

Some parts of Nuerland are blessed with better village sites than others. Lou country is exceptionally well favoured in this respect though Western Nuerland has many fine ridges. Lou people say that in a year of *nyuoc*, or high river-flood, their ridges remain dry